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“From Imus to Industry: The Business of Stereotypes and Degrading Images”

Dr. Tracy D. Sharpley-Whiting, Ph.D.
Vanderbilt University
Professor of French and African American and Diaspora Studies
Director of African American and Diaspora Studies
Director of the W. T. Bandy Center for Baudelaire and Modern French Studies

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Stearns, and other Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to provide testimony on this very important topic. It is a privilege to testify before the Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection.

Today, demeaning, degrading and objectifying Black women are undeniably profitable pastimes. From the cross-dressing male ‘Mammy’ à la comedian Eddie Murphy’s recent turn in the \$50 million dollar-generating Hollywood vehicle *Norbit* to the Don Imus’s “nappy-headed hos” kerfuffle to Rush Limbaugh’s referring to the accuser in the Duke lacrosse rape case as a “ho” to the “we don’t love them hos” ethos of much of commercial hip hop, a culture of disrespect, with Black women on the receiving end, packaged as entertainment permeates American popular culture.

There are iPod commercials that allude to strip club culture featuring an abundantly rumped Black woman holding onto a pole on a public bus. And then there is the Quentin Tarantino ode to alpha females in the second film of the double feature *Grindhouse* where the lone Black female character is the only one to utter ad nauseum an expletive that describes a female dog. Indeed, such antics have risen to the level of art, whereby entertainers believe they

should receive a ‘free pass’ because they are merely performing their craft—whether it be crude, curmudgeonly shock jocks, or grill-wearing, pimped out rap artists.

Although most Americans associate this culture of disrespect with hip hop culture, ironically such characterizations find their roots in our nation’s beginnings. In 1781, a mere five years after penning that hallowed document of a new nation, *The Declaration of Independence*, which prized freedom while sanctioning perpetual bondage, our founding father Thomas Jefferson set his sights on writing on his beloved state of Virginia. In between pages on flora and fauna in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson delivered a prophecy about race-based slavery in the United States. Of slavery, he would write, “it was a great political and moral evil,” and that he “trembled for my country when I reflect that God is just, that His justice cannot sleep forever. . . . Deep rooted prejudices entertained by whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained . . . will divide us into parties . . . end[ing] in the extermination of the one or the other races.” Of Blacks in general, he concluded that “whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances [they] are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind.” And of Black women, he suggested that they were more “ardent” and preferred “uniformly” by the male “Oranootan” over females of “his own species.” There were no orangutans to be found in Virginia to substantiate such an observation. This fact was of little consequence to Thomas Jefferson.

A deeply complicated and conflicted man, Jefferson, as is widely acknowledged, had a prolonged intimate relationship with the young slave girl Sally Hemmings. With *Notes on the State of Virginia*, our nation’s third president sealed an odious racial-sexual contract within our national fabric regarding Black women. Jefferson’s paradox has had an enduring legacy in the United States. Against this unequivocal founding doctrine, Black women have been continuously

struggling both in the courts of law and public opinion, in our very own communities, and as of late, on America's airwaves.

From slave narratives like Harriet Jacob's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* to post-emancipation writings such as Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South, by A Woman from the South*, Black women have been steadfast in decrying attacks on their character and morality. When after the president of the Missouri Press Association wrote an open letter addressed to an Englishwoman attempting to cast aspersions on the credibility of anti-lynching crusader Ida B. Wells, he made plain that Black women "had no sense of virtue" and "character." In response, the black women's club movement organized in July 1895 to defend their name.

Despite our strides in every area of American life—nearly two million college-educated Black women out-earning their white and Latina counterparts; one in four of us occupies managerial or professional positions, the profits to be had at our expense are far greater than the costs of caricaturing our personhood.

Our own complicity in our objectification requires some scrutiny as well. Consumer culture seduces many of us into selling ourselves short in the marketplace of ideas and desire. The range of our successes and the diversity of our lives and career paths have been congealed in the mainstream media into video vixens thanks to Karrine Steffans' bestselling *Confessions of a Video Vixen* or shake dancers given the frenzy surrounding the Duke rape case and hip hop culture's collaboration with the multi-billion dollar adult entertainment industry.

That sexism and misogyny appear to be working overtime in America to box us into these very narrow depictions of Black womanhood are part and parcel of the Jeffersonian contract. Hip hop culture is certainly waist deep in the muck of this race-gender chauvinism. Male feelings of displacement in a perceived topsy-turvy female-dominated world, increased

competition from women and girls in every facet of American life contribute to Black-male-on-Black-female-gender drive bys. And Black women's seeming resiliency, despite America's continuing race and gender biases, our strengths, are flung back at us and condensed into clichés such as the late New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan's "emasculating superwomen," or better still—that 'b-word."

Though America drinks to the bursting from that Jeffersonian well, it is imperative that women become more politically and socially conscious about the choices we make and the opportunities we take. As a writer and scholar and member of the so-called 'hip hop generation," I find aspects of American popular culture with its global reach and entrepreneurial and innovative spirit deeply gratifying and simultaneously painfully disturbing. For it has become abundantly clear that it is not so much that we women don't count. We do—in obviously various insidious ways. But we also don't add up too much—certainly not more than the profits, in the billions, to be had at our expense.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for the opportunity to testify before this Subcommittee today and I look forward to answering any questions you or others may have.